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## *Family Tradition*

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

IN Century City, the financial, entertainment, and commercial center adjacent to Beverly Hills, is a black, monolithic high-rise known as the Gamma Enterprises building.

### Keywords

Fiction; Family Tradition; Shelley Crisppey

# Family Tradition

IN Century City, the financial, entertainment, and commercial center adjacent to Beverly Hills, is a black, monolithic high-rise known as the Gamma Enterprises building.

As had been expected, the head of Gamma's acquisitions division announced his forthcoming retirement. Immediately, his two assistants, Tony Brigandolini and Allan Thompson, began competing for the position. Tony had a genius for making recommendations that proved extremely lucrative, but Thompson had a talent for making himself look good. Fed up with constantly having to anticipate and foil Thompson's underhanded maneuvers, Tony concluded he'd have to do something to effectively remove his competitor from serious consideration, something that would not reflect back on himself. So Tony decided to consult with his Great-grandpa Tonio, after whom he'd been named, and who'd helped him solve most of life's problems ever since his first fight at grade school.

At age eighty-seven, Antonio had outlived almost everyone else in the family. Tony and a few distant cousins were the only ones left. Antonio now lived in a luxurious condominium with a staff of household servants and personal attendants.

Mid-afternoon on a sparkling, warm Thursday, Tony arrived and found his great-grandfather in the den studying the latest stock market quotations on his holdings and investments. They embraced, as always on meeting or parting, talked about their health, the weather, news of the cousins, and various financial interests. Through large windows they could see the marina and, beyond the channels, the ocean. Sailboats jammed the waterways like rush hour traffic on the freeway, and a stiff breeze blew. Tony absentmindedly watched the seagulls soaring on the air. A silent, white-jacketed butler brought a silver coffee service and left it for Antonio to pour when they wanted it. The two men finally settled down in brown leather armchairs, comfortably facing each other.

His grandfather said, "You ready to tell me what's troubling you?"

In a few words, Tony sketched his situation.

Antonio stared in thoughtful silence at his pampered tropical fish in their elaborate aquarium. Finally he said, "So. You want to get Thompson into a position where he'll neutralize himself."

"That's right. It has to be handled carefully. If I'm clumsy or too obvious, I could defeat my purpose and lose the promotion, besides."

"The promotion should be yours, by right. Our family has a long tradition of loyal service to the Gammabardinos ever since I came here in 1928." He settled further back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. "This requires a fine Machiavellian touch, as we used to say."

Tony smiled briefly, restlessly, and asked, "You have a suggestion?"

Antonio gestured to him to be patient. "First," he replied, "have you ever heard of the Lancaster Theater in North Hollywood?"

"Can't say that I have."

"I'm going to tell you something you can use to your advantage. I'm the only one still alive who was close to the Gammabardino brothers and knows the whole story. In the old days I'd have made you swear a blood oath of secrecy."

Tony instinctively raised his right hand and muttered, "I so swear it."

Antonio nodded, satisfied.

"Tell me: do you believe in ghosts?"

"GHOSTS?! Come on, Grandpa Tonio! You know me. I'm no ignorant, superstitious peasant."

"What I am going to tell you may change your mind," Antonio said as he poured coffee and handed Tony a cup. "Remember, not a word to anybody. Never!"

Tony let his coffee sit untouched, steam rising.

"I was a teenager when we came to this country. In my prime. Full of piss and vinegar. My brothers and sisters, uncles and cousins, all scattered. Some settled in Atlantic City and Chicago, others in New York, Philadelphia, and a few in New Orleans. I wanted to come to Hollywood. Get into entertainment. Right away I found out that the Gammabardino brothers had the territory like this." He made a tight fist.

"We made an agreement, and I handled special contracts for them. Times were good, then," he said wistfully.

"You became a top mechanic."

"Yeah. Had a lot of respect. When they needed the best, they sent for me," he tapped himself on the chest, "Me."

"The Lancaster Theater. That was one of your contracts?"

"It was the last business place I touched. After that I took contracts only on individuals."

He leaned forward to look at Tony's cup, "Your coffee's getting cold."

"I forgot about it," said Tony and took a cautious sip.

"It's still too hot."

Antonio liked his coffee scalding. He poured himself a second cup.

by Shelley Crisphey

**"You two felt only a brief, mild effect,"  
Gladys said, "because you're both such  
thoroughly decent men."**

Tony said, "I don't see how the Lancaster Theater, or ghosts, relate to my situation."

"I'm coming to that. Back in 1915, when silent movies were becoming so popular, a lot of ordinary small businesses got converted into theaters. The Lancaster Theater was originally Lancaster's Hardware. When I came along in '28 there was a lot of money being made. Everybody was cutting themselves in. As I mentioned, the Gammardino brothers, Luigi and Marco, had things pretty well sewed up out here."

"Except for the Lancaster Theater," said Tony as his imagination leaped ahead.

Antonio nodded, swallowed his steaming coffee, and continued, "James Lancaster would have been all right if he'd only shown a little respect."

"So the Gammardino brothers sent you to teach him a lesson."

"Yeah. I went there one Friday, a little after midnight." He stopped momentarily and cleared his throat. "That flimsy old wooden theater he was so proud of was shellacked, varnished, and polished to high heaven. And that's where it went, too, in a great gorgeous blaze."

"No survivors?"

Antonio shook his head. "Not in the conventional sense. She went up so fast, and it was so beautiful, I stood there with my mouth open like an idiot. Nearly got trapped myself."

"And afterwards?"

"Next morning I was on the first train to Chicago. Wanted to get the stench out of my nostrils. Even now I can't stand the smell of burnt meat."

"Why Chicago? Especially in winter."

"I'd rather have gone straight to New Orleans. But I owed a cousin a favor, and I'd promised to help him with a job. What with this and that, we finally did it on St. Valentine's Day. When that was finished, I had my vacation in New Orleans."

"What about the ghosts?"

Antonio looked momentarily nonplussed. "Oh, yes. The Lancaster's ghosts. Well, James Lancaster's son promptly rebuilt the theater and was back in business as before. Except for one thing," he paused to light a cigar, "they never held a Friday midnight show again from that minute to this."

"Why? What happened there?" asked Tony and leaned forward, finally engrossed.

Antonio lifted an admonishing finger. "The young have no patience," he muttered. "Marco, the younger brother, sent a couple of his boys to deliver another message like the one Luigi sent to Lancaster's son, Gerald. They roughed him up a little; nothing serious. He was able to walk again with braces on his legs. Anyway, the son told them he'd have the insurance payment Friday after the

ten o'clock show which finishes about midnight."

"Didn't that settle matters?"

"The collector Marco sent was found the following morning twenty-five miles away, shuffling along the Santa Monica beach. His hair, as dark as yours, had turned pure white, and his mind was gone. There wasn't a scratch or a bruise anywhere on him."

"What did Marco do?"

"He sent another torch to put the Lancaster out of business, permanently."

A pigeon on the window ledge pecked at its reflection in the glass.

"That should have been the end of it."

Antonio shook his head and said, "The highway patrol found that one towards morning, over seventy-five miles away. He'd parked his car at the side of the road that goes across the desert to Las Vegas. He'd used all his materials to build himself a funeral pyre."

The pigeon kept looking at itself, fascinated, turning its head this way and that.

"Marco took all his men and went to deal with the Lancaster son himself that same afternoon. They were wearing business suits, but they were armed like a SWAT team."

"I heard about it later from Marco's chauffeur. He stood lookout while the rest of them went into the theater. In about five minutes the audience had been given its money back and the last employee to leave hung a CLOSED sign on the door."

"This was in daytime?" Tony asked. He'd read someplace that ghosts were creatures of the night.

"Bright daylight." Antonio paused, puffed on his cigar. "An hour went by. Two hours. The chauffeur got worried. Tried the front door. Locked. The back door. Locked, too. Same with the side exits. Whole place locked up tight. Everything quiet as a tomb."

"What did he do?"

"He called Marco's brother, Luigi, who came and brought all his men with him. They couldn't manage to get in, either. They tried picking the locks; shooting them off; even used fire axes. Nothing worked, until Luigi himself, in a wild rage, kicked the back door. Just like that," he snapped his fingers, "it flew open."

Antonio paused while he made the sign to avert the Evil Eye before continuing. "Without stopping to think, they all rushed inside. All but the chauffeur. Twenty minutes went by, then thirty. An hour passed. The door still stood open. It was dark inside. Smelled burned and dank. And it was cold, unnaturally cold. Completely silent. The chauffeur wanted to go in and look for them, but he was afraid. There was no one left to call that he could trust, except me. I didn't know what I could do, but I rushed over there. Arrived just in time to see them all

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"Think it over, gentlemen." Allan Thompson snapped shut his endangered species attache case. "Five times your last year's profits in a lump. It's a very generous offer."



come out. They never noticed me."

The pigeon on the window ledge flew away.

"What had they been doing all that time?"

"I never found out. But I can tell you this much: they'd all aged nearly thirty years. White hair, creased faces, empty eyes. Some of the men were practically gibbering. And they were all strong men. Strong," he added with emphasis, "not like the spineless sissies today."

"What became of everybody?"

"The chauffeur went to Havana. Bought himself a small nightclub there. Later, I heard he got knifed by a jealous husband."

"And the rest?" asked Tony again patiently.

"Some killed themselves. Some had fatal accidents. Others got sick and died. In a few months they were all gone."

"And the Gammardino brothers?"

"Their nephew took them to a secluded villa on the Costa del Sol. They were never seen in public again. The nephew came back and took over here. He completely reorganized the operation. That's when your grandfather joined them. He was the first investments analyst for Gamma Enterprises, as they started calling themselves, and they hired a lot of bright young attorneys, financial experts, and tax specialists."

"Now the Gammardino heirs spend the money, but my heirs still help make it for them. It's a tradition you can be proud to continue."

Tony sighed and leaned back in his chair. "You're right. That promotion does belong to me. I know exactly what to do, now. It'll work to perfection. No one will ever point a finger at me."

The following morning, as soon as he arrived at his office, Tony reached for the legal-size yellow pad on which he habitually roughed out his proposals. Working in pencil with many erasures and crossings-out, he drafted a statement recommending acquisition of the Lancaster Theater for their adult film division. Then, instead of preparing it for formal presentation as he would a genuine proposal, he crumpled it up and dropped it into his wastebasket. Later, when he returned from lunch, he noted the crumpled yellow paper was missing from his wastebasket.

He smiled to himself.

"Think it over, gentlemen," said Allan Thompson and snapped shut his endangered species attache case. "Five times your last year's profits in a lump sum. It's a very generous offer."

James Howard Lancaster and his son, James Lawrence,

exchanged disbelieving glances. Their shabby, old theater was one of the few remaining family-owned movie houses in Los Angeles. They'd never expected that the infamous Gamma Theaters porno chain would be interested in buying them out.

The three men were sitting in Howard's cramped cubbyhole of an office just off the theater's lobby. Howard was in his accustomed place behind the oak desk that had been salvaged from the smoking ruins of the original theater. Larry had squeezed an old wooden folding chair into the office and sat quietly to one side.

The walls were covered with 8x10 autographed gossies. They represented a pictorial history of the American film industry from Al Jolson as "The Jazz Singer" to the "Star Wars" robots C3PO and R2D2.

"We wouldn't consider selling under any circumstances," Howard said.

"I'll be in touch with you again," Allan Thompson extended his professionally manicured hand first to Howard, then to Larry. "Our offer may look more attractive after you've had a chance to consider it carefully."

"I'll show you out," Larry said.

At ten o'clock in the morning the theater was dark and deserted. The smell of long-since-eaten hot buttered popcorn still permeated the lobby, and yellowed old posters that were collectors' items were carefully preserved in glass-mounted frames. The earliest poster advertised Charlie Chaplin's "The Gold Rush" as a new release, coming soon.

As Larry pushed open the door to the parking lot, the two men blinked in the bright August sunlight. Searing Santa Ana winds blew. Allan Thompson flinched when he burned his hand on the door handle of his gleaming white Mercedes. Even the steering wheel was too hot to touch.

Larry returned to the office and seated himself in the chair that Thompson had just vacated and said, "You going to call Ernie, Dad?"

Their cousin Ernie was an attorney with a real estate firm in Century City. His company occasionally had dealings with Gamma Enterprises.

"I just finished talking to him. He says the parent organization was established in the late 1920's and that they have a reputation for ruthlessness. Their business practices are within the law, but only just. He also mentioned an internal upheaval going on over there. Something related to one of their top execs retiring."

"I wonder why they'd want to bother with us, and why now."

"Maybe Thompson figures it'll be a feather in his cap if he manages to take us over. Or it may be a tax-related

"The walls were covered with 8x10 autographed glossies. They represented a pictorial history of the American film industry from Al Jolson as "The Jazz Singer" to the "Star Wars" robots C3P0 and R2D2.



move," said Howard and glanced at his desk calendar. "Tomorrow's Friday. We'll come in at midnight. Maybe James, Gladys, and Gerald can give us some helpful background on the company. They were still alive when it was just getting started."

The following night, a few minutes before midnight, the four generations of Lancasters met in the theater's lobby. James, Gladys, and Gerald had a real and solid appearance. Only a faintly shimmering aura and dated clothing and hairstyles suggested they were not of today's world.

In 1929, they'd been watching "All Quiet On The Western Front" when the theater burned down. Since then, every Friday at midnight they returned to watch that same film. "All Quiet On The Western Front" always appeared on the screen on Fridays at midnight -- no matter what film was actually in the projector, or even if there were no film at all.

James, Gladys, and Gerald took seats in front of Howard and Larry and sat turned half sideways facing them. "You look worried," Gladys said. "I hope it's not something serious."

"We're not sure yet if it is," Howard said.

"Tell us about it," James said.

"A representative of a pornographic movie chain is trying to buy us out, and there seems to be more to it than meets the eye. Ernie says they're ruthless and that they stay barely within the law. The company was just getting started while all of you," he gestured to encompass the entire audience, "were still alive. We thought you might be able to help us figure out why they'd be interested in our theater."

"What's the name of this outfit?" Gerald asked.

"Gamma Theaters. They're a division of Gamma Enterprises," Howard replied.

As with one unearthly voice the three older Lancasters cried, "The Gammabardino brothers!"

The theater plunged into black, freezing cold. The air swirled violently, filled with cold blue flames and bitter smoke. Gruesome hallucinations and visions appeared crowding reality from the mind; an enormous pressure crushed hearts and squeezed air from gasping lungs.

Almost as soon as it began, it stopped, and the atmosphere returned to normal. Relieved, Larry and Howard slumped in their seats, dazed and shaken.

"What was that!" they gasped.

"Our fury," said James calmly, "and the potential anger and hostility of the both of you someday. All this

concentrated, magnified, and turned inward upon you."

"You two felt only a brief, mild effect," said Gladys softly, "because you're both such thoroughly decent men."

"Has--has this happened to anyone else before?"

Larry said, still regaining his breath.

"Yes, twice," said Gerald. "A long time ago, when those brothers and their men came here after they'd had us burned down and I'd rebuilt the theater."

"I always thought your fire was an accident," Larry protested.

Gerald shook his head and said, "Those brothers sent an arsonist when Dad refused to knuckle under to their extortion demands."

"After we were killed," Gladys sighed, "they beat Gerald horribly when he stood up to them. We thought he'd never walk again. And then we found we had the power you just experienced."

"I never realized that," Howard said.

"I never mentioned it," said Gerald, "because those brothers kept clear of us after that and I thought we'd heard the last of them. Besides, it was such a long time ago. You were just a little tyke then."

Howard said, "Someone's apparently decided to revive the brothers' vendetta, otherwise that Thompson fellow wouldn't be coming around here now."

"We may never know what's behind this," James said. "But if you need our help in dealing with it we can manifest ourselves any time you summon us. We'll handle it as we've done before."

The following Monday morning before the theater opened, Allan Thompson visited Howard and Larry again.

Howard told him, "We're not accepting your offer. Our family has four generations of attachment and a long tradition in this theater."

Thompson said in a silky voice, "I'm sure you'll discover that refusing our offer is most unwise." He allowed a little time for this to sink in as he polished his amber-tinted aviator glasses and adjusted his miniature gold ingot cufflinks.

Larry said, "Are you going to warn us about fire hazards?"

Thompson looked at Larry with an expression of distaste and said, "Sending goons with cans of gasoline fell into disfavor over forty years ago."

"Selling is out of the question," Larry repeated. "This is an unusual house with a long tradition..."

Thompson interrupted. He was interested in cash flow and financial statements, not the Lancasters' theatrical or family traditions.



For nearly an hour he cajoled and tempted. He quoted profit and loss figures, projected changes in the neighborhood's population, and cited their irregular income and rising costs. He tried to persuade them that The Lancaster would be bankrupt and derelict within the year. He insisted that the neighborhood was already deteriorating into a slum.

"Only one of our Gamma theaters would be profitable here," was Thompson's refrain.

Finally growing impatient and eager to be rid of Allan Thompson once and for all, Howard said, "There is really nothing further to discuss. We're not selling and we have our own good reason for it." He started to rise.

Allan Thompson looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling and lightly bounced his fingertips together. Then, reaching some private decision, he took his notebook and flipped through it pages.

"Ah, yes," he said, "here we are. Your maintenance service, food and beverage supplies, and insurance coverage are all provided by companies in which Gamma Enterprises holds a controlling interest. In fact, we also have, ah, informal associations, shall we say, in film distribution."

Howard and Larry exchanged glances.

"Mr. Thompson," Howard said quietly, your insistence on buying this theater puts us in an extremely peculiar position."

"Peculiar? How?"

"Well, we've been protecting a family secret that's existed here for fifty-six years, you see."

"What kind of secret?"

"If you'll come with me to the auditorium," Howard rose, gesturing to Thompson to accompany him. As they crossed the lobby Howard said, "I trust that you'll hold this in complete confidence."

"We'll see."

When they reached the auditorium, Howard pulled the door open and held it wide with his shoulder allowing Thompson to precede him down the aisle.

"He's from the Gammardino brothers!" Howard shouted.

A cold blast blew the door shut with such force that its edge slammed Howard back out into the lobby, knocking him to his knees. As he regained his feet he caught a stench of burning flesh that raised the hair on the back of his neck. Along with the smell there came sounds he'd never before in his life heard from any human throat.

Larry grabbed his father by the arm and dragged him outside.

The door locked itself behind them.

They looked at each other apprehensively and unsteadily made a circuit of the building, checking all the exits. All were locked and resisted their efforts to open them.

Howard pressed his face close against the glass doors at the street entrance and shaded his eyes as he peered

into the lobby. It was dark and quiet.

A half hour later, they went back to the parking lot to see if Thompson had left. His white Mercedes was still there. While trying to decide what to do, the side door to the auditorium opened and Thompson came out. Even at that distance they could see how he'd changed.

The spring had gone out of his step and his face was deeply lined. His graying hair was now completely white. "Are you all right?" Howard asked.

Allan Thompson looked at him with eyes that were empty glass marbles and said, "I'm fine. Why?"

"You look like you've just seen a gho ..." Larry caught himself.

"I am a little tired. I don't think I'll go back to the office right now." He paused uncertainly, "But, there was something important ... a promotion ... a project ..."

Thompson's expression became even more vague. He gave Larry an unfocused look, "Do I know you?"

"We were just passing," said Larry quickly. "You look like you might be feeling ill."

"I'm all right. Just a little tired. Been working too hard lately."

"Shall we call someone for you? Will you be able to drive?"

"I'll be fine," Thompson insisted absently. He got into his car.

Howard dashed back to his office and hurried out with Thompson's attache case. He thrust it into the Mercedes, and he and Larry watched as Thompson slowly, carefully, drove away.

Next day a special delivery letter arrived from Tony Brigandolini, Vice President for Acquisition, Gamma Enterprises. Howard and Larry were restocking the candy counter when it was delivered. Howard spread it open on top of the glass case and they read it together, Larry murmuring key phrases under his breath.

"... Acquisition offer reviewed at highest corporate level ... expansion program now complete ... acquisition offer hereby withdrawn ... assure you no further approach ... sincerely regret any inconvenience ..."

Howard and Larry grinned at each other.

"I wonder what's become of Thompson," Larry inquired softly.

"I'm going to call Ernie, tell him the good news. Maybe he can find out something for us."

Forty-five minutes later Ernie called back with his report, and Howard called Larry to his office to relay the news.

"Ernie says the word is that Allan Thompson suddenly had a complete mental breakdown due to overwork and exhaustion. Seems that last night he was flown to Switzerland by chartered jet and admitted to one of those private clinics that specialize in nervous disorders."

"Couldn't have happened to a more deserving fellow," said Larry cheerfully. ■